

Spring into Earth Day

by Leah Eskelin



Community groups, like this Girl Scout Troop cleaning up Slikok Creek, help get the Kenai Peninsula ready for summer (credit: Leah Eskelin/USFWS).

It's spring! I celebrate this fact in the sun warming my back, the drip, drip, drip of water melting off the roof, and the patchwork quilt of snow in the forest outside my window where, soon, little sprigs of green will push up through the accumulated birch seeds and brown leaves. I celebrate this change of seasons before, in its fleeting way, spring becomes summer and everything speeds up.

I take note of the way the frost looks on my car door in the morning since it will be gone by midday. I count the new birds each day who come to visit the

feeder because soon their bright songs will fade as they start to nest. The feeder will come down this week, too, and the last of the seed will get raked up, so it doesn't entice neighborhood visits from a bear family. I look for this family's tracks as I stroll along a puddly trail, and enjoy seeing a caribou grazing in a meadow. I take note of spring as I gear up for summer.

I also take note of something else, and it makes me stop in my tracks: the glint of aluminum in the roadside ditch, a wind-rustled plastic bag fluttering from the willow branch, the soggy cardboard debris once

hidden under months of accumulated snow. It all has been revealed. It's time to take action! I carry a small trash bag for just this opportunity, to leave this place cleaner than it was when I arrived. I take a moment to pick up the trailhead. I drop the aluminum can in my truck bed to recycle, and the trash bag beside it. It's not much, but my effort is noticeable.

As we approach April 22nd, Earth Day, the little things we can do to help the Kenai Peninsula get ready for summer can make a big impact. We can all take steps to help protect the environment. Called "Acts of Green," the collective effect of these small actions are how salmon streams stay clear of debris, how roadsides get filled up with lupines and fireweed instead of discarded trash, how recyclables stay out of the landfill and how 2 million acres of public land we call the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge stays wild and clean.



A caribou snacks on a sunny spring day (photo credit: Leah Eskelin/USFWS).

What are some "Acts of Green" that really make a difference? First, an easy one for all ages: **Pick up Litter**. What gets thrown out now eventually makes its way to the ocean where the impacts of one little plastic bag, even when it degrades into very small pieces, will be felt for 400 to 1,000 years, being consumed by or ensnaring marine animals for generations.

Second, **Plant Native**. When we add native plants to our gardens we support local pollinators like butterflies which in turn help keep habitats healthy and diverse.

Third, **Clean Up Pet Waste**. The melting snow reveals a mine field of scat in many yards and on roadsides this time of year. Spending the time now to pick up this waste helps protect our waterways from runoff pollution that can harm fish and other wildlife and make the water unsafe for drinking.

Another "Act of Green" that has a potentially monumental impact on wildlife is to **Avoid Cat Predation**. Remember those birds I have been counting at the feeder? Cats are responsible for killing over a billion wild birds annually. Keeping cats indoors means songbirds can successfully nest, migrate, and remain a part of the Kenai ecosystem. "Acts of Green" can become the norm, done every day without conscious effort, it just takes practice. That's where Earth Day at the Kenai Refuge comes in.

Spring is an opportunity for communities everywhere to stretch their winter-weary legs, get outside and explore. I hope you and your family will join the Earth Day Celebration at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center in Soldotna. On Saturday, April 22, 2017 from 2:00 until 4:00 pm, rangers and refuge volunteers will host a Discovery Room full of earth-friendly activities including recycled wire jewelry, native seed planting, a recycling relay race (can you beat the ranger?) and reusable tote bag decorating (while supplies last).

Drop in for some hands-on fun suitable for all ages then hit the Keen-Eye Trail for a short walk and soak up springtime. Children can even earn their Junior Ranger badge and start the summer off with their own "Act of Green." Call the Visitor Center at 907-260-2820 for details.

Leah Eskelin is a Visitor Services Park Ranger at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Find more information about the Refuge at <http://kenai.fws.gov> or <http://www.facebook.com/kenainationalwildliferefuge>.